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Libermann's Respect for Persons (continued)

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LIBERMANN'S RESPECT FOR PERSONS*

(continued)

LIBERMANN, LEADER OF MEN

I believe that what I have told you . . . will suffice for you to conclude that Libermann really knew and practiced the 'holy art of directing the things of God', of which things man is the principal one, 'gloria dei vivens homo'.¹

That was how I ended my conference at the Generalate on February 2, 1977. I could have finished in the same way my article on *Libermann's Respect for Persons*, but, in the life of Libermann, there is such a riches of texts and abundance of facts that I thought it would be good to present more, so as to give a better knowledge of his personality and to enrich our own. That is why I decided to add this third part.

1 – RESPECT FOR PERSONS IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Libermann is without doubt one of the greatest spiritual directors in the church. He was convinced that God had given him this charism.

You can . . . without fear, have full confidence in what concerns direction; for, in addition to the general rules which should be enough to put aside our fears, there is something special: I believe that it has pleased God to give me a particular grace for the truths of salvation and the direction of souls.

Libermann expressed himself this way in a letter of June 21, 1846 to Father Jerome Schwindenhammer. Taking advantage of the occasion, he goes on:

* Cf. *Spiritan Papers*, No. 2, pp. 25-43, and No. 3, pp. 25-45.

¹ *Spiritan Papers*, No. 3, p. 45.

*This is what fools people in my regard, and allows them to take me for what I am not . . . ; it is a grace which is only for others and from which I get nothing for myself . . .*²

In the letter which accompanied the "Instructions Missionnaires" he speaks in a similar way to his *dear confreres*:

You know that God varies His favors according to the diversity of His merciful plans . . . in order to reach the end He has in view: the sanctification of His creatures. From all eternity He has picked you out as victims, . . . immolated for the salvation of souls . . . ; I was not judged worthy of that grace . . . But, even though it did not please God to give me the inestimable grace of suffering for His well-beloved Son . . . , He gave me the grace of directing in His way those servants whom He has chosen for this purpose, and whom He wants so to sanctify for the salvation of those poor souls.

*If one considers the order of grace in this world, I am greater than you, and you must listen to my voice as to that of God; for it is He who speaks to you through me, His divine grace is with me and animates my words, and all this is for the same purpose, for your sanctification and that of the souls for whose salvation He immolates you . . .*³

From these texts, we can already see what the role of a spiritual director is: **an instrument in the hands of God**. Libermann's great principle is that the true director of souls is the Holy Spirit whom he frequently calls **The Divine Leader**. It is He, not man, who must direct souls, even if man presents himself under the title of spiritual director in the conviction that he has this charism.

A director, writes Libermann, still only an acolyte, on December 15, 1839 to Father Féret, the Director of a seminary in France, must guard against wanting to lead a soul,⁴ it is God who is to lead, and the director is to bring the person to the point of not placing any obstacles to that leadership. He must never seek to inspire a soul according to his own tastes . . . , nor to lead it according to his way of seeing things . . .

² *Notes et Documents* (henceforth listed as *N.D.*), VIII, pp. 177-178.

³ *N.D.*, XIII, pp. 404-405.

⁴ Only *lead* is underlined by Libermann. Unless otherwise indicated, all texts in this article have been underlined by the author.

*A director who has his own ideas . . . , principles, according to which he moves himself, often resists the leadership of the Holy Spirit in souls. It is not our place to impose laws or limits upon Our Lord . . .*⁵

Libermann is opposed to any systematization of spiritual direction: it would do harm to souls⁶. The director must leave great freedom for the action of grace; i.e. of God:

*. . . the important thing is to let God act in souls, to follow His action and strive to make souls faithful to the divine workings, leaving God free to act and not hindering Him by detours, imperfections, or his own over-energetic action.*⁷

There is nothing more intimate than God's relation with souls. Spiritual authors compare it to marriage. The soul is the bride, Jesus is the bridegroom. The director has no right to go into the bridal chamber: he is only *the friend of the bridegroom*⁸ (Libermann is familiar with the Gospel expression *amicus sponsi*).

Yes, he writes to Miss Louise des Loges—later Sister Aurelia—, with all my heart I am willing . . . to direct your soul in the way of the divine love of our gentle Lord Jesus . . . Open your soul with freedom and gentleness; . . . have confidence in my words and my leadership, for you can be assured that I enter fully into the plans of the divine Master for your sanctification and I hope that He will give me the grace of His divine light . . . I shall always try not to look into your interior, nor to enter into your soul, but to lead it only by divine grace.

Then Libermann asks her always to have an outlook of faith and never to become attached to him, for he is nothing but a poor man, a simple tool of Jesus, even though His image and His mouth.

. . . be pure in your outlook, . . . in your sentiments. . . Don't get attached to this poor man . . . , but only to Jesus . . . When I speak gentle words to you, don't say that I am good. When it pleases God to let you find some light, don't say that I am enlightened; it is Jesus who gives you light. When my words cause

⁵ *Lettres Spirituelles*, II, pp. 311-315; *N.D.*, I, p. 673.

⁶ Letter to M. Clair, January 10, 1844, *N.D.*, VI, p. 13.

⁷ *Lettres Spirituelles*, II, p. 388. Letter to a director of a Seminary, 1839.

⁸ John 3: 29.

*you to desire the good, don't say that I am holy. It is Jesus alone who is the holiness of your soul. Belong to Jesus alone, love Jesus alone, live for Jesus alone. But be docile to my direction; see Jesus in me; may every word of mine be for you the word of our gentle Jesus . . .*⁹

In the letter to Father Jerome Schwindenhammer quoted above, Libermann compares himself to a *telegraph between God and the souls* whom he is called to direct in the ways of salvation. His charism is *a grace, which is purely for others, and from which he gets nothing (for himself), like the men who send very important messages by telegraph, for which they receive only a small recompense and of which they understand nothing at all . . .*¹⁰

The telegraph and the telephone are beautiful examples for explaining the role of the spiritual director! As a matter of fact, the director is a simple instrument, like the telegraph which does not transmit its own messages, but those of others. The spiritual director too should transmit only God's messages.

The role of the spiritual director is to help souls to follow God's ways. If he does this, he will respect souls and be faithful to God. If he does not do it, he is only a pseudo-director.

In the letter to Father Féret quoted above, Libermann blames him for the kind of direction he is giving his seminarists:

I don't like your principles for directing vocations . . . It seems to me that you want to set yourself up as the judge of vocations . . . whereas that is not the job of a director at all; the director has only to obey the will of God as it is made known in a soul . . .

*It is certain that, in directing souls, we must ceaselessly consider the call of God's grace in them, and a director who is not on the lookout for that will never do very much for their sanctification . . . The director, once he has discerned that God is acting in a soul, has no other function but to guide that soul to follow grace and be faithful to it*¹¹.

⁹ October 23, 1842. *N.D.*, III, pp. 319-320.

¹⁰ *N.D.*, VIII, pp. 177-178.

¹¹ *Lettres Spirituelles*, II, pp. 310-311.

Fidelity to what God points out to the soul and to what God points out to the director. The director must seek only God's will in souls, by prayer and every form of union with God, especially by practical union. *What then, Libermann asks, is the means the director should use to recognize God's general line of conduct in a soul . . . if not the light from God alone which he has to receive in prayer and in his habitual union with Our Lord?*

In this respect, the words of *St. Paul* are very applicable: *As, in human affairs, only the human spirit can judge; so also, in divine things, only the Spirit of God can discern; and if we are really united to that Spirit, He will get us to penetrate right into the profundities of the Divinity whenever this is useful for the salvation of souls.*¹²

We can conclude, therefore, that a director who does not live in intimate union with God cannot be a true director because he will not have God's light for leading souls along the paths of holiness.

2 – RESPECT FOR PERSONS REQUIRED OF SUPERIORS

Even though men are equal by their nature, there are diverse capabilities, there are different roles in society. In the human community there is a hierarchy,—there are those who command and those who obey. God wants everybody to obey his superiors: *omnis potestas a Deo* (Rom. 13: 1). Hence, when authority is legitimate and laws are just, *citizens are bound in conscience to obey. From this spring the responsibility, the dignity and the importance of those who govern.*

This is what Vatican II reminds us of in the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*.¹³ And the decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, referring to religious superiors, has this to say: *As to superiors, . . . docile to the will of God in the accomplishment of their task, they will exercise authority in a spirit of service to their brethren, in such a way as to express the love which the Lord has for them. May they govern those under their charge as the children*

¹² *Lettres Spirituelles*, II, p. 312.

¹³ *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 74, 4.

of God, with respect for the human personality and by inspiring their voluntary obedience . . . ¹⁴

In a spirit of service. On this theme, Libermann gives us a real *Magna Charta* in his letter of August 8, 1843 to Mother Marie Villeneuve, Superior of the Convent of the Immaculate Conception of Castres. I shall quote a short extract, inviting all who can do so to read it in its entirety.

He writes: *As to the office of superior, a general rule which includes all others is that we come not to be served, but to serve.* From this general rule Libermann goes on to its practical applications: *You are the first servant of your community. The difference between your service and that of the domestics is that you must sacrifice yourself for your mistresses; a domestic only has to do her work. Our Master has said: I have come not to be served, but to serve and to lay down my life. These words contain all the duties of a superior, for it is to superiors that they are addressed. . .*

Then he enumerates the demands of this service: *Hence, your regime must be one of gentleness and humility; you must not have your orders carried out, but the orders of the Master whose servants you all are. You are a domestic in the house of Jesus Christ, charged with having His children carry out His will. The domestic is a servant both of the children and of the master; she owes all her care to those dear children; she must respect them in heart, she must carry out and have carried out the Master's wishes, but she must not put on the airs of a mistress . . .* ¹⁵

Benevolence, a necessary virtue for superiors

According to Libermann, always the friend of the poor, the unhappy and the weak, benevolence must be one of the great virtues of superiors.

In the letter about Miss Morillon already quoted,¹⁶ he writes to the same superior about some sisters who are preparing to leave for the mission to the Blacks:

¹⁴ *Perfectae Caritatis*, No. 14 c.

¹⁵ *N.D.*, VI, p. 293.

¹⁶ *Spiritan Papers*, No. 2, p. 38.

*Don't be astonished to see that our sisters are still imperfect. Where will you find a perfect soul? We must . . . not always take as a misfortune what is sometimes only a temptation. If I may be permitted to give you a bit of advice, I should like to stress what I already told you: let there be a great liberty of spirit in your house . . .*¹⁷

Liberty of spirit How greatly Libermann appreciates it and always recommends it to his correspondents, even—or especially—in their relations with God! *Belong to God alone . . . , but with freedom; make use of creatures . . . as if you did not make use of them;* he wrote to M. Clair,¹⁸ *but not,* he wrote to M. Casteilla, *with a liberty other than that of the children of God, the freedom of divine love . . . The more a soul has attained interior purity, the more it will have that holy freedom which excludes sadness, trouble, worry, contentiousness . . . of mind and heart*¹⁹

Souls undergoing temptation should merit especially great respect and attention from superiors. *It is wrong always to take for misfortune what is often only a temptation.*

Libermann writes to the Superior of Castres: *. . . I must warn you against something which ordinarily happens when one has to do with souls which are greatly tempted: we always tend to make an un favorable judgment of what went before . . . We must be filled with charity and simplicity as arms against suspicion . . . and try to have great charity and compassion for these persons . . . : always tend to judge them favorably . . . , to treat them with tender affection . . . and to treat their temptations as one treats a sickness . . .*

And, after speaking of the development of several cases of souls undergoing temptation which he had treated, Libermann continues:

Learn . . . , from this bit of experience I have shown you, that you must not be so quick to condemn tempted souls easily, nor to judge them rigorously, or to despair of their becoming virtuous in the future. You must support them with the charity and humility of Jesus Christ . . . We are much more unbearable to Him than these poor souls are to us, and still He puts up with us!

¹⁷ March 20, 1844. *N.D.*, VI, p. 128.

¹⁸ *N.D.*, VI, p. 13.

¹⁹ June 12, 1842. *N.D.*, III, p. 211.

And he concludes: *We cannot save souls without being crucified*²⁰—an echo of the Letter to the Hebrews: *Without shedding of blood, there is no pardon.*²¹

*Our poor nature . . . , Libermann writes to Father Dupont, always tends to see evil and to punish and detest it in others, . . . The grace and the light of the Holy Spirit do just the contrary. This divine Spirit is all charity. It does not criticize and does not have a tendency to criticize; . . . (it) inclines us to believe the good more easily than the evil; when it makes us see evil in our neighbor, . . . we are moved . . . by tender affection, and we tend to remedy our brothers' ills with gentleness and kindness.*²².

Evidently this benevolence does not dispense superiors from the **duty of correcting** faults at the opportune time and place; *but they must do it with a great spirit of gentleness and in a manner which will console the persons corrected. Every correction which causes pain, which causes commotion and bitterness, is a correction badly made, and usually produces only harm . . .*²³.

Libermann points out to Father Le Vasseur how he ought to deal with Father Blanpin who was going through a bad spell:

*There is more error than bad will in him . . . You must help him . . . ; treat him as if were sick, with kindness; don't give him orders with an imperious air . . . ; act . . . gently . . . with him, and at the same time don't give in on important points. It is good not to seem too attentive to little things. Don't ever authorize what is not good . . . but don't give the appearance of always noticing what is not right . . .*²⁴

Gentleness, always . . .

Libermann could be called the *doctor of gentleness*. He recommends it incessantly: gentleness, calmness, moderation.

Always remember that gentleness and persuasion penetrate souls, whereas firmness and rigorousness only bring about an ex-

²⁰ September 28, 1842; *N.D.*, IV, pp. 364-367.

²¹ Hebrews 9, 22.

²² August 13, 1843; *N.D.*, IV, pp. 309-310.

²³ Letter to the Superior of Castres, March 20, 1844; *N.D.*, VI, p. 129.

²⁴ June 28, 1847; *N.D.*, IX, p. 209.

ternal change. Thus, for the external order of the house, firmness (but a gentle and calm firmness); for the interior direction of souls, gentleness and kindness (This was his advice to the Superior of Castres). You must know how to bend and be very supple in directing souls, . . . spare them . . . , in order to support them, to encourage them endlessly according to the different states they are in. This is what St. Paul called being all things to all men.

Note well, he continues, that rigor, direct resistance to souls in bad dispositions, will break them, but will never cure them. Put up with what is wrong for a long time; and, if you sometimes think you can't put up with it any longer, put up with it some more and you will finally see that you have done the right thing . . .

*Sometimes we reprove and persecute a poor soul who is doing wrong under the pretext of preventing an offense against God; and often this is not true,—we are acting out of impatience . . .*²⁵

Father Gravière, who had been named superior of the community of Bordeaux, reproached Libermann for *easily making excuses for inferiors against their superiors*. The Venerable Father wrote to him shortly before he died:

You are still convinced that I easily take sides with inferiors against superiors. That idea is totally wrong . . .

a) *I do not, and I have never, condemned superiors, even when they were wrong. But neither do I approve of them when they are wrong; i.e. I do not approve the wrong they do . . .*

b) *I use precaution with confreres who are imperfect, stiff, or tempted. I speak with moderation, gentleness and care . . .*

*To this first complaint you add that I listen too much to those who are discontented . . . ; but I must listen to all who complain; if I were unwilling to listen to complaints, I would close my heart to all who are in trouble, their condition would get worse and I would no longer be able to help them . . .*²⁶

Above all, weak souls should not be submitted to trials beyond their strength.

²⁵ August 8, 1843; *N.D.*, IV, pp. 295-296.

²⁶ October 22, 1851; *N.D.*, XIII, pp. 332-333.

We must always proportion trials according to the persons, and never impose a trial unless we are morally certain that the trial will succeed. Take care: you will never find very many perfect people.²⁷

On another occasion, he wrote to the Superior of Castres:

*Avoid contradicting people as much as you can. Trials are for perfect people. We lead the imperfect as best we can, and try, by gentleness, to have them do what they are able to do.*²⁸

To Father Duby, appointed superior of a community in Africa; Libermann recommends that he not **make a big show of being superior, be firm and gentle at the same time.**²⁹

In his letter of March 4, 1843 Father Libermann tells Le Vavas seur how to deal with Father Collin—that very simple person, of great piety, with burning zeal, very courageous and constant, of good judgment, who has great firmness and, if he is faithful to grace, great gentleness, but also very stiff, hard, obstinate, argumentative with and against everybody, if he follows his natural inclinations . . . You must not resist him to his face . . . with stiffness. Let the difficult moment pass by, and then when things are going better, reason with him gently. In that way you will be sure of getting him to go the way you want him to.³⁰

In a letter to the Superior of Castres, Libermann speaks of the enormous burden of the care of souls and especially the heavy burden of imperfect souls who must be supported with humility, love, confidence in God.

*Put up with them as Jesus puts up with them. Lead them as Jesus leads them. Show them consolation, gentleness, peace, as He does.*³¹

Very often "to love" means "to put up with" . . .

At a time when Father Lossedat, a missionary in Haiti, was greatly troubled by the abuses among the Island's clergy and wanted Father Tisserant, the Prefect Apostolic, to take strong measures to deal with them, Libermann wrote to him:

²⁷ Letter to the Superior of Castres, September 1853; *N.D.*, IV, pp. 368-369.

²⁸ August 25, 1843; *N.D.*, IV, p. 325.

²⁹ May 8, 1851; *N.D.*, XIII, pp. 141-142.

³⁰ *N.D.*, IV, p. 129.

³¹ August 25, 1843. *N.D.*, IV, pp. 324-325.

*Don't torment yourself about all those abuses. Abuses can never be cleared up all at once... when they are ingrained; ... Have patience; you will see that you will gain ground little by little...*³²

Really to do good requires heroic patience, and not a premature eagerness which causes all to be lost.³³

Weak souls cannot correct their faults in one sweep; what they need is good will, docility to the Holy Spirit and encouragement. If all these are present, they will change little by little.

But it is not enough just to put up with others; we have to put up with ourselves. Father Collin was a very sensitive man who did not get on well with his companion, Father Blanpin. In a letter to Libermann, he admits that he is at fault and talks about breaking his character. Libermann replies:

Get used little by little to living at peace with your enemy... *you have a temperament which gives you a lot of trouble; don't get it into your head that you absolutely have to get rid of it; rather convince yourself that it is the divine will that you live with this enemy... Put up with it with patience and gentleness...*

Don't be talking about breaking your character... *We don't break iron, we soften it with fire...; give yourself peacefully to the divine love with confidence, humility, abandon... and talk with confidence to Our Lord...*³⁴

"Don't judge",—"Love"³⁵

Sometimes superiors have to pass judgement. Libermann speaks of this in a long letter to Father Dupont, dated August 9, 1842.

Superiors, who often have to pass judgement, must empty their will of all malice so that there may be no malice toward those they judge and, on the contrary, they may love them with great tenderness...

In general, those who pass judgement are not capable of doing so, and those who could judge don't want to do it... And, without doubt, making allusion to himself, he continues:

³² December 27, 1844. *N.D.*, VI, p. 506.

³³ September 17, 1844 to the same Father Lossedat; *N.D.*, VI, p. 342.

³⁴ January 29, 1845. *N.D.*, VII, pp. 34, 36-37.

³⁵ Letter to Father Jerome Schwindenhammer; *N.D.*, IX, p. 298.

Those who, after twenty years of fervor, have arrived at a degree of perfection where they are solidly at peace, and where the light of faith illumines things for them a little,—these have no great desire to pass judgement. I say twenty years, because for fifteen years now,³⁶ I have been trying to get somewhere, and I assure you . . . that I am still far away from it . . .³⁷

When you examine your sisters and pass judgement upon them, Libermann wrote to the Superior of Castres, never let any sharpness into your spirit; charity must fill your being and be the soul of this activity . . . your spirit must be free of prejudices and observe peacefully what is happening in the soul it is trying to understand . . . Seeing evil, the will must remain charitable and tender towards the soul . . . In a second action, the spirit must consider, in peace and before God, the remedies for curing that soul . . . and always make use of them with the same charity and under the guidance of the Spirit of God who enlightens the intelligence . . .³⁸

Utopian perfection: a great danger

One of the temptations Libermann had to fight in many of his correspondents — and especially his collaborators — was that of an idealism in perfection and in the administration of the things of God.

Le Vavas seur was, without doubt, very generous, but too absolute and idealistic. Libermann asked him to be more realistic.

You want everything to be perfect immediately, without taking any account of the perplexities which are always met with at the start of a work . . . You see the ancient Orders and you demand that everything among us be put on the same perfectly regular footing as in those old Orders; but I tell you that this is impossible . . .

At the beginning of a work, there is a whole crowd of circumstances which cannot be forced into the rigor of general rules . . . Oh, how important it is to have discretion in the direction of God's works! You are lacking in this virtue . . .³⁹

Father Lossedat, back from Haiti and gone out to Guinea, wrote to Libermann to point out to him the qualities needed in

³⁶ From his conversion, Christmas 1826, to 1842.

³⁷ *N.D.*, III, pp. 272-274.

³⁸ August 8, 1843; *N.D.*, IV, pp. 296-297.

³⁹ January 28, 1846; *N.D.*, VIII, pp. 33-34.

the successor of Tisserant as Prefect Apostolic of Guinea. He received the following reply:

It is difficult for me to send you the kind of man you ask for . . . I don't have him just now . . . I well know that the Mission is difficult, but I believe you exaggerate certain difficulties . . .

You form a perfectionist's idea of things and you want that perfect conception to be realized in its entirety. That is not, and that never has been, the way Divine Providence works . . . It wants there to be some imperfections at the start . . . It is the part of the greatest wisdom (even human wisdom) in these cases to yield a little bit on one's point of view and manage with people the best one can . . .

Then Libermann draws his attention to a very important principle of action: **Be on your guard against ideal perfection.** And he goes on:

It is good to be able to conceive how things ought to be; . . . but it is even more important to be able to modify, . . . to accommodate to persons, things, circumstances . . .

You can be sure that you will never be able to carry things out just as you would wish . . . It is of the greatest importance . . . to adapt to everything, if you want to succeed; otherwise, you will be shattered against the difficulties . . . ; learn how to put up with something being half done, even badly done. In order to have peace of mind, in order to be able to accomplish great and important things, you must at all cost acquire a certain indifference towards the evils which you cannot clear up . . .

By means of a tolerant way of acting . . . you will necessarily acquire a certain influence over spirits, . . . you will be a great help to others . . . If, on the contrary, you cannot remain silent about the smallest faults you see in the way your confreres act . . . , you will be almost always in oppositon to them, because it will almost never happen that you find men exactly as you would like them to be.⁴⁰

Shortly before this, Libermann had already explained the same thing to Fathers Collin and Le Vavas seur.

In April 1845, Libermann sent Fathers Lambert and Ples-sis to Réunion (Bourbon) as reinforcements to the three first missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary. Soon Collin and Le

⁴⁰ April 15, 1846; *N.D.*, VIII, pp. 110-113.

Vavas seur realized that Father Plessis was not suitable at all. They both wrote letters of complaint to Libermann. Le Vavas seur even threatened to leave the Congregation. Their Superior replied to them individually on January 28, 1846.

To Collin he wrote: *The two of you are tearing my heart out . . . and you are right: I deserve it, because I am to blame. But what can we do now? . . . I made a mistake in admitting such a subject . . . I committed a fault, I deserve to suffer for it and I must offer expiation . . .*

After this humble avowal of his error, Libermann goes over to the attack: *But be at ease, dear Brother,—things are going better than you think . . .*

Then, passing in review several proposals that Collin had made, Libermann continues:

*Your views on administration and on how to run a congregation are about as practical as mine would be . . . for the political strategies of Louis-Philippe. If I had followed the path traced out for me in your letters, the Congregation would already be dead and buried. Let me do my job . . .*⁴¹

He writes in similar vein to La Vavas seur the same day: *If I had taken the unyielding line you wanted me to adopt, there would not be a stone left upon a stone in our work.*⁴²

Four and a half years later, in similar circumstances, he wrote him these still more grave words:

*At times . . . I say to myself: what will become of the Congregation if Father Le Vavas seur is placed at its head as I would like him to be. If he continues along his present line, two months after my death this poor Congregation will be dead . . .*⁴³

Those who find it surprising that Libermann chose Father Schwindenhammer as his successor, would do well to meditate upon these words written such a short time before his death! Libermann could never choose Le Vavas seur. Between Le Vavas seur and Schwindenhammer, the latter was in Libermann's eyes the better choice after all.

⁴¹ *N.D.*, VIII, pp. 40-42.

⁴² *N.D.*, VIII, p. 34.

⁴³ *N.D.*, VIII, pp. 40-42.

But Libermann's letter to Collin continues:

You are bad philosophers, you reason from the particular to the general. An unworthy subject has been admitted, therefore all is lost; therefore we have acted in a light-headed manner . . .

Don't be so severe in your judgments . . . If you had been in my place, you would perhaps have made greater mistakes than I did, and in much greater number . . .

You judge things a bit too speculatively; on the subject of religious life, you are so optimistic that there does not exist a religious society which could justify your judgment, because it is impossible in practice for a community to be made up of men as perfect as you would like to have them.⁴³

In his letter to Le Vasseur, Libermann gives a concrete example of this rigoristic idealism in religious life:

You propose . . . a principle so rigoristic that it is absolutely impractical. You would like all the members of a congregation to be so perfect, and of such a degree of renunciation that they could be worked like a set of marionnettes. No doubt that would be very pretty, but it has never existed in the Church and it never will.

And Libermann, alluding to Le Vasseur's leaning towards the Jesuits, continues:

The Jesuit Fathers are certainly at least one of the most fervent religious societies in the Church; still, with the rigorous principles you propose, you would have to dismiss at least half of their number . . . Don't be making juvenile judgements in such grave matters . . .⁴⁴

When we compare these words with those in his letter of October 28, 1839 to the same Le Vasseur on the subject of the members who would make up the Work for the Blacks, we would be tempted to say that at that time Libermann was an idealist himself:

I want something solid, fervent, apostolic: all or nothing. But "all" is asking a lot, and weak souls will not want to give or to do so much. That can only make us happy,—we can't have weak souls in this wholly apostolic Congregation; we only want fervent and generous souls who give themselves entirely and are ready to

⁴⁴ *N.D.*, VIII, pp. 34-36.

undertake anything and suffer anything for the great glory of our adorable Master . . . ⁴⁵

Was Libermann an idealist himself in those days? Maybe not. A few months later he wrote to Father Luquet, one of the supporters of the Work for the Blacks who, perhaps influenced by Father de la Brunière, proposed leaving the work to go to the missions in China. As the principal motive for this project, Luquet mentioned his fear of *causing trouble in the community*. Libermann wrote:

That is a reason you could attribute to the devil . . . you will cause trouble? but that will be the field of battle where you must often win the victory. But our confreres? What wonderful compassion the demon can inspire in you! . . . Do you believe that there is a community without temptations against charity? There does not exist a single one. In fervent communities, however, people put up a fight and win the victory. But the disorders which result from the time of battle before the victory is won? I am not afraid of them and I shall not take the demon as my adviser in the matter . . . ⁴⁶

Was Libermann an idealist in 1839? Perhaps . . . but in 1840 he no longer was.

His letter to Le Vavas seur ends with these words full of tenderness:

Sometimes I say rather severe things to you. Don't be troubled by them. I don't want to cause you trouble, and I assure you that, if there is some severity in the words I use, there is no place for it in my heart. May God's peace be with you . . . ⁴⁷

3 – THE SECRET OF LIBERMANN'S BENEVOLENCE

What was the secret, the source, of Libermann's benevolence? Without wanting to speak about himself explicitly, he explains it to the Superior of Castres:

The more you advance in solid perfection, the more you will become indulgent of the weaknesses and miseries of your sisters,

⁴⁵ *N.D.*, I, p. 662.

⁴⁶ July 1840; *N.D.*, "Complements", pp. 25-26.

⁴⁷ *N.D.*, VIII, pp. 34-36.

and the more you will become gentle with them and at peace within yourself... This is the secret and source of Libermann's benevolence: his *solid perfection*.

And Libermann continues:

*Already one superior of a convent has told me that I was too gentle in direction and that you have to be more severe in dealing with women. Another person told me that I did not understand what goes on inside women. If I am wrong, I accept the condemnation willingly, But I find it hard to leave aside the spirit of Our Lord in His dealings with souls... Do, in your case, ... what God inspires you to do. My way is the opposite. I spare women even more than I spare men... I don't give in to their imaginings, but I do spare them. Up to now, the results speak in my favor...*⁴⁸

According to Libermann himself, Father Dalmond, the Prefect Apostolic of Bourbon, must have taken him for *simple-minded*, because (he said) *I have never spoken to him except with moderation and concern for his feelings, even when I was telling him about things I was displeased with.*

*I see clearly that what you tell me in other circumstances is true; we have to be a little annoying and speak out to get what we want, but I cannot follow that method; I prefer to maintain a gentle manner, and state my case. If I am placed in an unacceptable situation, I simply refuse to go along, and that's that.*⁴⁹

In his letter to Mother Javouhey, he speaks about the conduct of the Minister of French Colonies in dealing with the Missions, and expresses a similar idea!

*The conduct of the Minister in our regard strikes me as so astonishing that I cannot go along with him... I thought that, if I had made use of intrigue, I might have gotten on better. They are not accustomed to having people deal frankly with them. But I could never adopt those ways; I shall never put aside the simplicity of the Gospel, if God gives me the grace... I am not a hireling...*⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Letter to the Superior of Castres, April 23, 1844; *N.D.*, VI, pp. 173-174.

⁴⁹ Letter to Le Vavas seur, December 18, 1845; *N.D.*, VII pp. 427-428.

⁵⁰ Letter to Mother Javouhey, January 15, 1845; *N.D.*, VII, p. 13.

Libermann was gentle, but also strong . . .

Fortiter et suaviter: that was Libermann's procedure with those whom he directed. When he had to be firm, he did so, but always gently.

He was firm with Father Arragon, ordering him under the vow of obedience to accept Father Gravière as his superior:

*I command you . . . in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ to receive Father Gravière with affability, charity and all the sentiments one must have towards his superior.*⁵¹

He spoke firmly with Father Vaugeois whose obedience to his superior was less than exemplary:⁵² *You don't have with your superior the union of charity which must exist in the family of our Heavenly Father. Neither do you have the spirit of obedience and submission worthy of a child of God. Now, without this union of charity and this holy obedience, you cannot possibly be pleasing to God . . .* Then Libermann softens his expression a bit, but without weakening it:

*These are hard things I am saying. However, it is my heart that says them to your heart and with great affection and a great desire for your sanctification. Go back to the source, enter into yourself and you will see that the problem is there and not in Father Gravière.*⁵³

His 1843 letter to Miss Guillarme about her over-human attachment to her spiritual directors is firm, extraordinarily firm:

You poor soul, stop being the slave of men and become rather the slave of Jesus . . . Spouse of Christ, what would you think if a queen, who received all kinds of tenderness from the king her husband, would leave that dear husband to go and throw herself into the arms of a beggar . . . dressed in rags and tatters . . . and embrace him and kiss him? . . .

You are the spouse of the King of kings, . . . and your heart wants to leave that divine Bridegroom . . . , the fairest of the children of men, and go and throw itself into the arms of these vile beggars! Do you really think that way? Are you insane? All your mortifications are worthless, all your meditations are meaningless, all your good deeds are without value; these are not

⁵¹ Letter of May 8, 1846; *N.D.*, VIII, p. 144.

⁵² The same Father Gravière, then Superior of the Bordeaux community.

⁵³ Letter to Father Vaugeois, October 25, 1851; *N.D.*, VIII, pp. 338-339.

what the divine Bridegroom asks of you: it is your heart—all of it, without any sharing or any holding back.

I mock your good works. . . ; I ask you for only one thing, your heart,—not for me, I despise it and want only Jesus, . . . but for this divine Jesus Himself. He wants it, He demands it imperiously . . .

You will say, my poor child, that I am impossible to deal with. Yes, impossible to deal with, hard as iron and marble, because I know that you can hope for no truce, no peace, except in immolating all your affection for creatures, every desire to live with them and enjoy them . . .

The letter goes on in the same tone. At a certain point, he says:

But you will be in desolation over what I am saying and the way I am pursuing your poor heart. It seems to me that I am reaching for a light which is only half burning; i.e. that I am crushing a poor heart which is already far too troubled. Oh, no! That is not it at all; just the contrary. This is solid, serious, vigorous direction which I am giving you, which will lift up your broken heart and fix it in Jesus alone . . . Don't think that I am angry with you . . . The charity of Jesus Christ is in my heart. I hold out for one thing only, I have only one desire in the relationship with your soul which our good Master has confided to me. It is to make of you, and present to the divine Master, a virgin pure and spotless, worthy to be His holy spouse and to rejoice in divine union with Him.⁵⁴

Probably these words were enough to bind up the wounds which Libermann had inflicted upon his correspondent. Still, when he went to Paris a few days later, he went to see her.

I am coming to see you to console you in the name of our Blessed Mother for the great pain caused you by my words, to which you gave a meaning I had not intended. Calm yourself. I am leaving you this note in case I don't find you at home . . . I said those things to you . . . to inspire in you fear of sin and greater reserve; but it must be a loving fear and a gentle and modest reserve . . .

Vigilance . . . gentle, holy, peaceful, loving . . . in the presence of Jesus and Mary is very pleasing to the divine Bride-

⁵⁴ Letter with no date, but surely from 1843; *N.D.*, IV, pp. 315-317.

*groom. May He alone be your guardian, your love and your all! Live only for him in Mary, by Mary, and with Mary.*⁵⁵

4 – THE HOLY ART OF DIRECTING THE THINGS OF GOD

On May 7, 1850, Le Vavas seur came back from Bourbon to France to help Libermann in the direction of the Congregation. He made a tour of many of the seminaries of France to make known the works of the Congregation.

No doubt he heard a lot of criticism of the priests trained and sent out by the Holy Ghost Seminary. These priests, once so highly esteemed, had enjoyed a bad reputation for some time. Some went so far as to advise La Vavas seur that the best thing the Congregation could do would be to close the Holy Ghost Seminary.

Le Vavas seur, forceful, radical, impressionable as always, wrote to Libermann proposing *the dissolution of the Seminary . . . and the abandonment of the Colonies.*

Libermann sent a first reply on «the holy feast of Pentecost» 1850:

*I believe that we cannot, without gravely failing the divine will, either leave the Seminary or abandon the Colonies . . . The Seminary work is difficult . . . ; but is that a good reason for giving it up? It is my opinion, therefore, that we must remain in charge of this house . . . and take all possible means to make it a holy house . . .*⁵⁶

Since that letter did not calm Le Vavas seur's imagination, Libermann wrote to him again on July 17:

. . . I shall speak frankly to you, you ought to expect that of a poor man who loves you tenderly and who is filled with consolation by your presence . . .

There are moments when discouragement comes over me, not discouragement about our work for God . . . and the task He has given us . . . , on the contrary, as soon as I see the difficulties and the troubles, it seems as if the Divine Goodness gives me new strength; . . . So don't have any fears for me; God is my strength; nothing in the world frightens me.

⁵⁵ Letter to the same person, perhaps from the end of June 1843; *N.D.*, VII, pp. XI-XIII.

⁵⁶ Letter to Le Vavas seur; *N.D.*, XII, pp. 198-200.

I have examined what you told me and meditated upon it before God . . . I find energy in it, far too much energy; but I do not find there either wisdom, or experience, or anything of that would indicate the working of the Spirit of God. I see an unshakeable will to do good and to do it perfectly, but it is the will of a fervent seminarian who has no practical idea of the things of God, and, thinking it is abandoning itself to the love and the action of God, it lets itself be taken over by its effervescent nature . . .

Libermann goes on in the same vein, what he had already referred to as his counter-attack. He said some hard things to Le Vasseur, but things that unfortunately were true:

. . . Your worries appear to me to be the worries of a child who has no knowledge of men or of affairs . . . If there were no difficulty, what would we have to do in God's work? . . . I am a very weak and miserable man; but surely you are more so. With all your energy and your indomitable courage, you have weakened . . . before men . . . You have a strong and vigorous heart, and still that heart . . . has been . . . influenced, won over by men's words and arguments . . . You are on the wrong road, outside the ways of God, even outside the ways of sound reason . . . You rely upon the experience of the men who talked to you . . . We shall discuss openly both men and affairs, and we shall see whether they are really men of experience and whether their experience has any weight in the matter we are concerned with . . .

Then Libermann gives him some good advice:

Here is my advice to you:

1) Become child-like, convince yourself that . . . you need to learn more about how the works of God are to be directed, how to direct men and affairs in relationship with our works.

2) Don't take up ideas with such enthusiasm . . . , always be suspicious of ideas . . . which take such violent hold over you . . .

3) Beware of that illusion of wanting absolute perfection in men, in institutions, and in things in general . . . We must . . . be fully convinced that wherever there are men, there will be imperfection. We have to attain to what we can without shattering . . . I have noticed that the real saints have always acted in the way I am describing, and the little saints . . . act in the opposite way.

4) Convince yourself that, if you want to insure failure in the administration and direction of the works of God, you

have only to take this course of action: I shall go straight towards my goal and I shall never bend; I shall act with energy and vigor; I shall act with frankness and tell people exactly what I think of them.

Go straight towards the goal, when there are no obstacles in your path; if there are obstacles, you will shatter yourself and others . . . *and you will destroy instead of building up.*

Finally Libermann criticizes Le Vavas seur's impetuous frankness:

Your energy has three faults: the first is in your manner of considering things . . . *You always get them wrong . . . You generally see things from only one angle, you consider only one principle, and as a consequence of such a half-blind vision, you end up in theory; you are not capable of seeing the other principles which run counter to yours and modify them, nor the circumstances which change the situation.*

The second fault is in the way you apply principles. *You either push them too far or else you apply them badly.*

The third fault is in your being unmethodical and misdirected; unmethodical: beating the air, this way and every way; and tearing, bruising, brawling at things that need to be handled delicately and with care; misdirected: often striking what should not be struck and may sometimes even merit praise.

That energy of yours also has this other fault: it tends towards a particular liking for the most radical means and methods. Now, radicalism . . . is hateful, destructive of any good in the administration and direction of holy things. Do you know what I called you when I read your letter? . . . a revolutionary and a radical who builds upon errors . . . which he mistakes for principles . . .

As for frankness . . . we have to be frank and simple, but according to the prudence of the Spirit of God . . . *We have to know how to discern good and evil . . . , know how to speak and how to keep quiet, to act and to refrain from acting, all the while maintaining simplicity in word and action towards our neighbor, without which we will never be able to deal with his weaknesses, his passions, and his sensibilities . . .*⁵⁷

The frankness of Le Vavas seur seems to have been that of Rousseau. But this is not the frankness that God expects of us, nor men either; it is not the frankness of Libermann.

⁵⁷ Letter to Le Vavas seur; *N.D.*, XII, pp. 316-321.

In a moment of difficulty in the Dakar community in 1846, Libermann speaks of his way of action with frankness:

If sometimes... I address to you words which are not in conformity with your ideas and tastes..., don't be unhappy, don't judge me harshly. It happens sometimes that, in spite of my desire to please you, in spite of the certitude that my words are not exactly what they should and could be, I am obliged to be satisfied with motives of prudence... I am often obliged to weigh my words, to keep silent about one thing, to modify another...; you can be quite sure that in these cases I suffer more than you...⁵⁸

True frankness does not consist in opening one's mouth and emptying one's heart without any restraint. It is always allied with prudence and charity.

Libermann ends his letter to Le Vavas seur with a summary of what he had told him:

Briefly, ... if you do not correct yourself..., you will never be more than a good assault soldier, or at most a captain capable of directing his company during the fight... God wants you to be more than that...; So become child-like in the direction of holy things...; learn like a schoolboy the holy art of directing the things of God. I am sorry to be such a poor teacher for you... listen to God who speaks to your heart...; be simple, humble, calm, independent of impressions and faithful to God, and even with a poor teacher you will be a good pupil.⁵⁹

These words, addressed first to Le Vavas seur, are also for all of us, because Libermann is a universal man. He wrote these prophetic words himself:

I am only the servant of all, I cannot pretend to any rights over myself, over my words, or my writings. I belong to everybody and everybody has the right to make use of me according to God's good pleasure... the word of God belongs to all His children.⁶⁰

Truly, Libermann is a universal man, an author whom everybody can consult with profit.

Amadeus MARTINS

⁵⁸ Letter to the Community of Dakar and Gorée, December 27, 1846; *N.D.*, VIII, p. 397.

⁵⁹ *N.D.*, XII, p. 321.

⁶⁰ *N.D.*, III, p. 100; Letter to Father Dupont, January 1842.